**Singular thought in non-singular propositions: A cognitive linguistic perspective**

The purpose of this talk is to show, from a cognitive linguistic perspective, that the interpretation of identity statements such as (1) and propositions about ‘aspects’ of an individual such as (2), generally considered to lend support to non-singular thoughts, is in fact supported by our ability to entertain singular thoughts (thoughts about individuals).

The puzzle raised by identity statements runs as follows: “Roughly speaking, to say of *two* things that they are identical is nonsense, and to say of *one* thing that it is identical with itself is to say nothing at all” ([15]: 5303, emphases in the original). According to the Fregean solution ([6]), *Clark Kent* and *Superman* have the same reference, but have different ‘senses’, which makes (1) meaningful. Note that, although object-determining, Fregean senses are essentially object-independent ([1]: 60). Since in principle any proper name can occur in identity statements like (1), it may be concluded that proper names in general have object-independent senses, which lends support to descriptivism, a dominant view in the philosophy of language (cf. [11]), according to which “our mental relation to individual objects goes through properties of those objects” ([10]: 141), and “our view of the world would be entirely qualitative” ([1]: 39).

A similar puzzle is raised by (2) ([12], [13], [14]). Given the identity in (1), (2) would be equivalent to (3), an absurd proposition. This problem can be solved by assuming that (2) expresses a proposition about different aspects of the same individual such as (4), rather than a singular proposition ([3], [4], [8], [9]). The fact that even unenlightened speakers (speakers who are not aware of (1)) can ascribe the same truth-value to (2) as enlightened speakers do ([2]) suggests that it is possible to access aspects directly, without recognizing that they belong to one and the same individual. It can then be concluded that the meaning of proper names is first and foremost object-independent, which again might lend support to descriptivism.

This talk argues that enlightened and unenlightened speakers do not understand (2) in exactly the same manner. To be sure, even unenlightened speakers can entertain the truth-conditional content of (2), given in (5). The same truth-conditional content, however, is construed differently by enlightened and unenlightened speakers. Especially relevant here is the cognitive linguistic view developed by Langacker: “Most broadly, a meaning consists of both conceptual **content** and a particular way of **construing** that content. The term **construal** refers to our manifest ability to conceive and portray the same situation in alternate ways.” [7]: 43, emphases in the original). For unenlightened speakers, *a* and *b* are different individuals as illustrated in Figure 1, while for enlightened ones, *a* and *b* are aspects of one and the same individual *c*, as illustrated in Figure 2. Unenlightened speakers, while being able to understand the truth conditional content of (2), still fail to capture the complete proposition expressed by (2) in that they wrongly construe *a* and *b* as two different individuals. This shows that the full understanding of the proposition about aspects *a* and *b* in (2) requires a singular thought about *c*, as against descriptivism.

The above discussion enables us to define the meaning of identity statements such as (1) without evoking Fregean senses, as in (6). Since, given the definition in (6), a proper understanding of *X = Y* necessarily involves both the notion of aspect and that of individual, the meaning of *X = Y* is essentially individual-dependent.

When there is an individual Z such that X and Y are aspects of Z, the terms *X*/*Y* can refer to Z by metonymy, in which case *X* and *Y* are equivalent to each other. Accepting *X = Y* thus amounts to recognizing that *X* can be substituted for *Y* and vice versa *salva veritate* if and only if *X* and *Y* have a singular reference (cf. [5], [15]: 6.23). This accounts for the fact that (3) does not follow from (1) and (2), where there is no singular reference, whereas (7), when interpreted as a singular proposition, is equivalent to (8). Crucially, those who live in entirely qualitative worlds would never accept the equivalence of (7) and (8), and thus never properly understand (1). This suggests that the understanding of identity statements presupposes singularism as opposed to descriptivism.

From the above argument, it should be concluded that, as a basic cognitive ability, singular thought is indispensable for a proper understanding of non-singular propositions such as (1) and (2), contrary to what has often been assumed in the philosophy of language.

**References**

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**Figures**

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| --- | --- |
| a = Superman | b = Clark Kent |

Figure 1.

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| --- | --- |
| c = individual having *a* and *b* as aspects | |
| a = Superman | b = Clark Kent |

Figure 2.

**Example sentences**

1. Superman is (identical with) Clark Kent. / Superman = Clark Kent
2. Superman leaps more tall buildings than Clark Kent.
3. Superman leaps more tall buildings than Superman.
4. Clark/Superman’s Superman-aspect leaps more tall buildings than Clark/Superman’s Clark-aspect.
5. Truth-conditional content of (2): An entity *a* referred to by *Superman* leaps more tall buildings than an(other) entity *b* referred to by *Clark Kent*.
6. X = Y if and only if there is an individual Z such that X and Y are aspects of Z.
7. Sometimes Clark Kent [=Z] leaps tall buildings. (adapted from Braun and Saul (2002))
8. Sometimes Superman [=Z] leaps tall buildings.